

THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE

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CHAPTER XVII.

A Troubled Idyl

LESTER remained at the Hall, and as nobody was likely to be inclined for early rising after remaining up half the night, he was not surprised to find only the servants stirring when he went downstairs about ten o'clock. He strolled out on a long balcony which overlooked the broad, smooth lawn, and presently came upon Aingier, now a hearty convalescent, who had been wheeled out to enjoy the fresh morning air.

He had slept soundly enough through the excitement of the previous night, and it was not thought advisable to agitate him with a recital of the latest outrage. Lester chatted absently for a time with the old lawyer. His thoughts were fixed on Edith, and he reproached himself bitterly for the absurd jealousy which had led him to treat her so coldly. In other words, the ridiculous position in which Bradshaw had been placed put an entirely different complexion on affairs.

In the midst of a discussion anent the state of the money-market, Lester was surprised to find his companion giving vent to a series of dry chuckles. For a moment he wondered whether that injury to the head had affected the old man's reason.

"Just as it should be," said Aingier, rubbing his hands, "just as it should be! The finest possible way out of a difficult situation!"

"But really I don't understand—"

"Look," whispered Aingier, clutching Lester's arm and pointing downward into the grounds.

Lester's eyes followed and he stood rigid, as though frozen by the sudden chill which fell on his heart. In the distance were Edith and Bradshaw; but the distance was not so great that he could not see the American's arm linked affectionately in that of his companion.

"The best thing that could have happened!" cackled old Aingier again.

Though Lester could cheerfully have killed him, he was not sorry that the solicitor was too absorbed in his own chatter to notice his agitation.

"It is quite clear that Lord Arncliffe's nephew has strong moral claims, and under these new conditions it looks very much as though the property will belong to both of them. I am delighted!" went on the other.

"Yes, yes!" said Lester, trying to keep his voice steady. "As you say, one of the best things that could have happened."

"The best thing that could have happened," he repeated dully. And though Aingier rattled on, Lester was too absorbed in his own thoughts to hear or care what was said. He realized, with a soul-shaking pang, that it was indeed the natural solution of the difficulties created by Bradshaw's appearance on the scene. Love-blinded, he had never for a single moment thought of such a development. What a fool he had been! Edith, of course, by this means would do justice to Lord Arncliffe's nephew and at the same time retain her proud position as mistress of Arncliffe Hall. He passed through an inferno of agony before he was able to address the lawyer in his usual quiet tones.

"I must be off now—good-by."

He strode down the balcony and made his way to the entrance hall. He must be alone. He felt that his face would betray him, though he was unaware of the extent to which that sudden anguish had carved its record. He was ashen pale, with the grayness which pallor brings to the cheek of a deeply bronzed man, and his eyes were contracted as though some sudden light had dazzled them.

He took his hat and went out. There was a turquoise sky; the breeze was gentle and balmy; a little way off an angel-throated thrush was singing the story of the sunshine; wherever Lester's gaze wandered, gay flowers flaunted themselves shamelessly at him. The very joyousness of nature smote him with a sense of outrage. Almost he could have

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Edith Concluded That a "Good Cry" Was Essential

wept. But the sound of a liquid laugh brought him back into defiant manhood; and when a moment later he met Edith and the American, still arm in arm, there was little except his extreme paleness to show the ordeal he was undergoing.

"You see I have cheated you," called Bradshaw gaily, as they approached.

"My dear fellow," said Lester, "this is really very imprudent of you. There is nothing serious the matter, but a cut like that may develop erysipelas, if you don't take care. You ought to have remained in bed for at least twenty-four hours."

"So I have been telling him, Dr. Lester," began Edith, instantly pausing, however, as she noticed how intensely pale he was. She had intended to exact humble repentance for his manner at their last parting, but now such trivialities were forgotten. He must be ill, she thought, looking up at him with tender anxiety.

Lester met her gaze with calmly inscrutable eyes. There was nothing of resentment in them; nor was there any sign of that wondrous telegraphy Edith expected to meet, and she began to feel deeply wounded. Then all at once she felt that her face and neck were flooded with crimson. She had just

realized that Bradshaw was still clinging to her arm with apparent affection.

She drew away, blushing yet more furiously. The action in itself was guilty, and it seemed to her that there came a gleam of contempt into Lester's eyes and that his mouth hardened. Yet she met his gaze truthfully and steadfastly, though she felt it was crushing her, and it was Lester who at length retired from the moral contest. After all, it was cowardly to shame a woman, whatever the circumstances.

"Pray, make this unruly patient return to his bed, Miss Holt," he said in tones so unimpassioned that they chilled Edith more than could any reproach. "It is hopeless to expect that he will obey me, but perhaps you may be more successful. And now I will thank you for your hospitality and say good-by. I have some important business which requires my returning to my rooms at once."

"But you have not had any breakfast," faltered Edith, not unwilling to detain him until an opportunity for explanation might arise.

"That is not a very serious matter," with a polite smile. "Good-by. And do send Mr. Bradshaw to bed."

He was gone, without even shaking hands. Edith was so dazed that Bradshaw's conversation sounded to her like some distant murmuring which she answered mechanically. A mention of Lester aroused her.

"Do you know," he said, "I think Lester looks frightfully ill?"

"Oh, no," she protested. "You see he did not have much rest last night."

"Such a man as Lester does not look as if he had swallowed an eel because of a lost beauty sleep," persisted Bradshaw with somber pessimism. "I have seen a lot of tribulation among my fellow-sinners, and when one of these iron men like Lester exhibits that sort of look on his face, it generally means he has got it in the neck good and hard."

"I do wish to goodness you would endeavor to speak English!" exclaimed Edith petulantly. "I don't suppose there is anything the matter with Dr. Lester. However, we do know that you are an invalid, so you will oblige me by doing as you are told and return to bed at once. No, no!" as Bradshaw began to protest, "I won't have any insubordination. Go to bed! Your breakfast will be sent up to you. And you are not to get up again until to-morrow morning."

"Are you going to nurse me?" asked Bradshaw hopefully.

"Certainly not—there are two trained nurses in attendance on Mr. Aingier, and one of them can very well be spared to look after you. Now I must go and see about household affairs, for I expect poor Mrs. Warren will not be fit for much after her alarming experience. Don't you think she showed remarkable presence of mind?"

He looked at her reproachfully. Without another word, he walked away to his room, with a pretense of offended dignity.

Edith did not attempt to see about "household affairs." She had reached the conclusion that what women call a "good cry" was absolutely essential. Directly she was free from the restraint imposed by Bradshaw's presence, she rushed to her room and, flinging herself face downward on her pillow, began to sob bitterly.

The real facts of the case were that the American, afraid the details of his escapade would eventually leak out, decided that an explanation coming from himself would place him in a far less ridiculous light than if some other person made the disclosure. He therefore made a clean breast of the whole affair to Edith, telling his story with so much naive humor that, although she strongly disapproved of his conduct in spying upon Mrs. Warren and her son, Bradshaw escaped lightly on that score. Best of all, he succeeded in making Edith laugh with him rather than at him.

So much for the bright looks to which Lester so unreasonably objected. As for the linked arms, the explanation was one that might satisfy the most jealous of lovers. Bradshaw, to excite sym-

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